

## *A Private Matter*

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I once heard of a tennis pro whose game had gone into a slump. He tried everything he could imagine to get his game back: fired his trainer, got another trainer, tried different rackets. Then one day he realized he'd forgotten the number one lesson in tennis: Keep your eye on the ball.

The same sort of thing often happens in meditation. You start out with a very simple process and then it gradually grows more complicated. After a while you forget the first principles: i.e., stay with your breath. So try to spend the whole hour staying with the breath, no matter what. Be really sensitive to how the breath feels, and to what you're doing to the breath. The breath is a fabrication, which means that there's an intentional element in the way you breathe. You want to be very sensitive to that, to what you're adding to the breathing process. Try to do it skillfully. As long as you're going to add an intentional element, add something good.

Your relation to the breath is something very intimate, very private. Often it's hard to talk about how the breath feels, because the breath feels like the breath feels. It doesn't quite feel like anything else. So we talk about it indirectly, in terms of metaphors and similes, realizing that our descriptions are approximate. When you hear something in the instructions, learn to translate it in such a way that it relates to what's happening in your direct experience. And keep your inner experience primary.

For example, I've noticed that one of the best ways of getting the breath energy in the body to be comfortable and full is not to put any effort into the out-breath at all. What effort there may be goes into the in-breath. As for breathing out, you don't need to help the body. It's going to breathe out on its own. When you don't force it out, that allows the breath energy to fill up in the body. This is hard to put precisely into words. It's not like you're trying to stuff the breath in, but because you don't squeeze it out, then each time you breathe in, breathe in, breathe in, and allow the sense of fullness to run along your nerves, the nerves begin to glow. Again, this doesn't fit easily into words, for it's not a visible glow. But there's a feeling of glow-like energy filling the nerves, radiating out from them, radiating out of the blood vessels. You try to breathe in such a way that maintains that sense of radiance. The body then feels a lot more comfortable, the

blood can flow freely through all the different parts of the body. It feels really good.

So try to relate that to what you're doing right now and see if you get results. If you don't, try experimenting a little bit on your own to see which way of breathing really *does* feel good in the body. When you do this, it sets up the issue of pleasure and pain, cause and effect, right from the start.

That's what the Buddha's teachings are all about: Why do we suffer from pain? How can we use the pleasure of a concentrated mind to lead us to even greater ease and wellbeing? Often it's best not to analyze the issue too much in advance. You can read the books on jhana or vipassana, and then try to impose the words on your experience. And of course your understanding of the words comes from where? It comes from ignorance. So that takes you away from your direct experience, away from this very private matter of why the mind is causing itself suffering, how your intentions are causing suffering.

So instead, try to approach the meditation from a standpoint that's more familiar: How do you feel right now? Which ways of thinking about the breath, which ways of letting the body breathe, lead to pain and a sense of constriction? Which ones lead to a greater sense of openness and ease? Start from your immediate experience and branch out from there.

That's the way Ajaan Fuang used to teach meditation. He'd have people get in touch with their breath. He'd use a few analogies and similes, and then he'd listen to the words *they* used to describe their own experience of meditation, when the breath felt "sticky," when it felt "solid" or "dense," when it felt "full." And then he'd use their vocabulary to teach them further. For instance, one of his students would talk about the "delicious breath," so Ajaan Fuang would start his instructions to that student by saying, "Get in touch with the delicious breath."

In this way, the meditation is not something imposed from outside. It's something that develops from your own inner sensitivity. Then somewhat after the fact, after you've had some direct experience with it, you can read the books and begin to relate their terms to what you've experienced. Even then, though, it's always best to take those terms and use them as post-it notes, for as you develop your inner experience further, your understanding of the inner terrain is going to change. You may have to move some of those notes around.

This is a much more trustworthy way of approaching the meditation than trying to fit the mind into a mold based on your understanding of what somebody else has written or said. If you do that, it takes you away from your direct experience, from your own sensitivity. And there's always that element of doubt: Does this really qualify as what they're talking about? Whereas if you approach it from the other direction—"If I do it this way, how does it feel?"—you know better than anybody else how it feels.

Now, your sensitivity may not be refined enough to see subtle levels of stress, but there's no way you're going to see those subtle levels until you deal with the blatant ones first. And it's a natural matter that over time, as you get more familiar with the breath, more familiar with the way the body feels from the inside, your powers of sensitivity are going to develop. You pick up things that you didn't notice before, both in the breath and in the way the mind relates to the breath. This way you keep the meditation very direct. It's your own private matter.

Ajaan Fuang once said that he didn't want his students discussing their meditation with anybody else aside from him. When you talk to other people, they have their ideas, they have their preconceived notions. Maybe they know something about meditation, maybe they're very wise, but that in itself is a questionable thing. You don't know how experienced they are, how much they really know. Secondly, you may start taking their words and trying to fit them on your own experience. If you don't have enough inner experience, it's very easy to get messed up. Even when they simply ask you a question, the way they frame the question already embodies a certain viewpoint. And that viewpoint may be questionable.

So keep your meditation a private affair. After all, the suffering you're causing yourself is a private affair, something nobody else can see. Even when we live together day in and day out, each of us is making a lot of decisions that nobody else here will know. We may see some of the outside effects, but the actual experience of suffering—your suffering, your pain: You're the only person who can feel it. And you're the only person who can know which little decisions you make from moment to moment to moment. That's what you want to learn how to observe.

So try to develop your inner sensitivity as much as you can, so that you can make sure your decisions are going in the right direction. The intentional element here is to try to minimize suffering as much as possible.

This is why breath meditation relates directly to the sublime attitudes we chant every evening. This is your front row seat on the question of how to bring about more happiness. "May all living beings be happy": All living beings are out there, but *you're* one of them, too, *in here*. This is the being you have the most direct impact on. So if you learn how to be kind to yourself in the way you breathe, it's going to be easier to be kind to other people. If you see that there's some stress and suffering inside, have some compassion for yourself. Try to breathe in a way, try to relate to the breath in a way, that minimizes that stress. When you learn compassion for yourself inside like this, it's a lot easier to feel compassion for others outside.

The same with empathetic joy and equanimity: When the breath is going well, appreciate it. Enjoy it. As for the uncomfortable things in the breath that you can't change, you've just got to watch them for a while. The word for equanimity—*upekkha*—actually relates to that quality of just watching, looking on. In other words, you see that this may not yet be the time to do anything, but you never know when the situation will change, so you just keep watching, watching, watching, until you detect things. And even here the breath helps a lot. It gives you a foundation from which to watch.

As you're staying with the breath, you're in the present moment. Simply being with the sensation of breathing helps pull you out of a lot of your thoughts, that ongoing committee discussion in the mind. If you're with the breath, you're like an outside observer on the committee meeting. You're not necessarily pushed around by the voices in the committee. In that way, you're in a better position to see, "Is this the time to exercise goodwill? Or is it more the time to exercise equanimity, compassion, or empathetic joy?"

So these two types of meditation—the meditation that develops the sublime attitudes and the meditation on the breath—really come together like this. The breath gives you practice in the proper attitudes and puts you in a position where you can see which of these four attitudes is appropriate at any one time, always taking your inner experience of stress—something you're most intimately related to—as your touchstone. That way, your knowledge is not just words. There's a direct experience underlying it all. As your skill is being developed, you're growing more sensitive to what that experience is, and more honest with yourself about where you're still causing yourself stress.

Your experience of stress is your only proof of whether the meditation is working, and even then it's reliable only if you're honest with yourself. You may want to look for an outside authority to verify things for you, but that leads to the question of who out there is awakened, who is not. You may have some ideas, you may have some intuitions, but you can't really prove anything about what's going on outside. Your only real proof is what lies inside. And until you make the inner proof as clear and as honest as possible, you'll have no proof about anything at all.

So this inner sensitivity, something totally private to you, is what you're trying to develop here. That's where you start; that's what helps keep you on the path.

And of course, this sensitivity doesn't necessarily have to be here only while you're sitting and meditating. Try to keep in touch throughout the day with your inner experience of what you're doing and what stress is or is not arising as a result of what you're doing, the little choices you make inside. Try to carry that awareness around as much as you can, in all your activities. Make that your first

priority. When you act, act from that point. When you speak, speak from that point. When you think, think from that point.

In that way the meditation becomes timeless. Ajaan Fuang once made the comment that our lives are often chopped up into little times: time to eat, time to talk, time to go here, go there, do this, do that. Instead of having more time when life has more times like this, everything gets chopped up into little tiny pieces and becomes less. But when you make this inner sensitivity as continuous as possible—you breathe in, let the body breathe out if it wants to, but you don't have to force the breath out; breathe in again, breathe in again—that inner sense of wellbeing can grow. Then as you carry it through the day, it becomes solid. It may take time to focus on it, time to get a sense of what helps it, what doesn't help it. But the sense of inner refreshment that comes: You want that to be as continuous as possible. The more continuous it is, the more strength it develops. The more resilient it becomes, the more you can rely on it, even in very difficult situations. This involves unlearning some old habits. Society often teaches us to give all our attention to things outside. What happens of course is that we lose touch with our own inner sensitivity. We become strangers to ourselves.

So reintroduce yourself to this inner sensitivity. Open up this area of your awareness, and be as sensitive to it as possible. In that way the meditation will grow in an organic way—not from words imposed outside, or ideas imposed from how you understand the words outside, but from a direct experience of what's actually going on inside. What works and what doesn't work, what's skillful, what's not, where there's stress, where there is no stress: These are the questions that only you can observe and only you can know. And they can be answered only by a very honest sensitivity that's always willing to learn more.